

Rise in preschool children receiving psychiatric drugs

Scott Gottlieb, New York

The number of preschool children in the United States receiving methylphenidate (Ritalin), fluoxetine (Prozac), and other drugs for psychiatric disorders increased dramatically from 1991 to 1995, according to a new study. In the study, researchers reviewed outpatient prescription records from two state Medicaid programs and one health maintenance organization.

The investigators analyzed these groups for the years 1991, 1993, and 1995. During the study period, they found that the number of antidepressant prescriptions doubled in both of the Medicaid groups and increased in the health maintenance organization's group too.

Ritalin was by far the most prescribed psychotropic drug, with prescriptions among children aged 2 to 4 years increasing substantially in all three study groups and tripling in two of them (*JAMA* 2000;283:1025-1030).

The use of clonidine, a blood pressure

drug gaining popularity as a treatment for insomnia associated with attention disorders, also increased. The researchers said that, although clonidine was prescribed less frequently than stimulant drugs, its increased use was notable because no rigorous studies had shown its safety or effectiveness as a treatment.

The study found that 2.3 children per 1000 in the Midwestern Medicaid group received prescriptions for the drug in 1995, compared with 0.1 child per 1000 in 1991.

Among antidepressants, the older generation of tricyclic drugs remained the most commonly prescribed, although the number of children receiving newer antidepressants—such as fluoxetine and sertraline hydrochloride (Zoloft)—increased dramatically in the Medicaid programs over the 5 years. In the Midwestern Medicaid group, 3.2 per 1000 preschool children received prescriptions for antidepressants.

“Rapid expansion of medication use for a particular problem raises questions about appropriateness, effectiveness, and long term safety,” said Magno Zito, associate professor of pharmacy and medicine at the University of Maryland and lead author of the study.

Several factors that may have contributed to the trend, Zito said, include a change in the criteria for diagnosing attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; a bigger role for schools in assessing children's emotional and behavioral needs; day care environments that may interfere with children's normal behavioral development; and a more favorable public attitude toward medical treatment of behavioral problems.

Although researchers have known for some time that such drugs are increasingly being prescribed for older children, the study is the first to document an increase among younger children.

Netphiles

How to find out about tropical medicine

Our understanding of tropical infections might have improved, but drug and vaccine development has been disappointing: the tsetse fly is a durable opponent, and Gambian sleeping sickness has risen sharply. African spending on health care is low, and public health measures are inadequate. Where to turn for help? The West, of course, or the web, which amounts to the same thing.

The American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (www.astmh.org/), the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine (www.tropmed.tulane.edu/), and the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in the United Kingdom (www.rstmh.org/) all are prominent web players. The Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, also in the United Kingdom, links to the Cochrane Infectious Diseases Review Group, and a practical section on treatment focuses on effective health care in developing countries (www.liv.ac.uk/lstm/ihtd98-ehc.html#eu). For a rousing tour, however, the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene is hard to beat. Follow its clinical site links to the World Health Organization's guide to vaccination requirements and health advice (www.who.int/ith/english/index.htm), as well as the CIA's "World factbook." As for an African perspective, forget it. Thailand is as tropical as the web gets (www.mahidol.ac.th/mahidol/tm/h-tromed.htm).

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